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SHOULD THE U FIGHT SECRET WA

Almost from the moment the first "contra" was issued his Arm made combat boots, the Reagan Administration's secret war against Nicaragua has been embroiled in a vociferous if somewhat bizarre public debate. Congressmen proclaim their outrage, editorialists voice their misgivings, while officials in Washington are running the war—blandly "decline to comment on intelligence matters."

Secret, or covert, wars are an honored tradition of postwar U.S. foreign policy, having enjoyed the height of a golden age in the 1950s, when they discreetly shuffled governments in Iran, Guatemala, and the Philippines. But the "controversial secret war" is a paradox peculiar to our post-Vietnam, post-Watergate democracy. At the root of the furor over Nicaragua lies a conflict that has obsessed America's public life for the last fifteen-odd years: the people's right to know versus the stated demands of national security.

Can any democracy effectively fight secret wars? Should the United States fight such wars? If so, by what moral right and in what circumstances? To consider these dilemmas, *Harper's* recently brought together intelligence officers, politicians, and diplomats who have confronted them firsthand and found them no less easy to resolve.

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